

## The Editorial Notebook

# Mr. Bush's Backdoor Bombshells

Most times when a President and his aides send public diplomatic signals, they want headlines and buttonhole the press to get them. But sometimes they'll make important points publicly and hope the press barely notices.

The intention is for their words to appear far down in the stories, where only a few people, like foreign officials, will notice. As is evident from two recent examples, such buried words often contain revealing policy messages.

For instance, President Bush grabbed headlines at the end of April by announcing that he would not impose sanctions against Moscow because of its actions against Lithuanian independence. And he also won attention by calling on "both sides" to negotiate. Then he slipped in his little explosive.

With regard to negotiations, he said, Mikhail Gorbachev "has indicated a willingness to do this. The Lithuanians have indicated *some* [emphasis added] willingness to do this." In other words, Mr. Gorbachev was showing more interest in a peaceful settlement than President Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania was.

Though this was a hard swipe at the Lithuanians, Mr. Bush didn't want Washington or the media to focus on it, and they didn't. But the remark could not have been lost on Russian and Lithuanian leaders who comb U.S. newspapers for hints of Mr. Bush's thinking.

What they found was this message: The White House is not happy with Mr. Landsbergis, and thinks he bears the burden of taking the next step toward talks. Having already given reporters more striking news on which to focus their attention, Mr. Bush could risk conveying this subtext.

The State Department employed a similar burial technique a couple of weeks ago in another delicate matter —

## Sending Signals Beyond the Media

expressing the Administration's opinion of who should form Israel's next government. Shimon Peres, the Labor Party leader, had just failed to fashion a parliamentary

majority. Yitzhak Shamir, the Likud leader, was about to take his turn.

Privately, Administration officials acknowledge that they do not want him to succeed. They feel he torpedoed his own plan to hold Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza after having won United States support for it.

When Mr. Shamir ridiculed Secretary of State James Baker for his efforts to begin Israeli-Palestinian talks, the State Department had its opening. At the daily press briefing, the spokesman waited for a question and then read a statement. Mr. Shamir's rejection of Mr. Baker's plan, the statement read, "will probably mean losing an important opportunity to move the peace process forward." It concluded with this rebuke: Mr. Shamir's "continuing to say no will give us very little to work with."

The words, read by a mid-level official in a routine briefing, did not make network news or front pages. But the message got through to Israeli politicians: The White House doesn't want to work with Mr. Shamir unless he fundamentally alters his position on dealing with the Palestinians.

If the press had made a fuss about either signal, the White House could have said Mr. Bush was simply speaking off the cuff about Lithuania and really wanted both sides to compromise. It could have said the State Department's statement on Mr. Shamir did not represent White House views. But with or without wide notice, two strong signals were sent, through the back door.

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